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What's in Store? – Towards a Welsh Strategy for the Management of, and Access to, Archaeological Collections

Background

In 1997 a survey of archaeological archives was undertaken in England for English Heritage and the former Museums & Galleries Commission. The resulting report by Hedley Swain, 'A Survey of Archaeological Archives in England' was published in 1998. The report highlighted the difficulty many museums were having properly curating archaeological archives; the lack of good guidance and standards in the creation of archaeological archives and their successful transfer to museums; and the limited use archaeological archives were being put to once in museums. It was recommended that a similar survey be undertaken in Wales.

Jane Henderson and Phil Parkes were commissioned to carry out this survey, which was intended to gather evidence to help plan for the future needs of archaeological storage and promote the importance of archaeological archives to policy makers. This process was overseen by a steering group, with representatives from the Council of Museums in Wales, National Museums & Galleries of Wales, The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales, and the Welsh Archaeological Trusts.

Following a Wales-wide survey and initial consultation a full consultation report known as 'What's in Store' was produced. This report contains an assessment of the current status of the collections, an investigation into the future levels of growth and an analysis of the threats and opportunities associated with these collections. Based on the evidence collected the report concluded with nine recommendations.

Definitions

For the purpose of the research it was necessary to precisely define the terminology used. There exists some confusion of the use of the term 'archive' in this context to include non written materials such as small finds and environmental samples so the steering group agreed upon a definition of 'archaeological archives' which was sent out with the survey forms and included with all relevant documents.

All material from archaeological excavations, evaluations, site assessments and formal field walking projects from Wales.

This includes all artefacts, human remains, environmental evidence e.g. bones, soil samples, paper records e.g. plans, notes and record sheets, photographic materials, digital records and any post excavation records in any format e.g. specialist reports, conservation reports, archive reports and publications.

Where a collection is essentially Welsh, but which contains a small amount of non Welsh material, this should be counted in the survey. If a collection has a Welsh focus but is split over a borders area, such as Offa's Dyke or the Monmouth area then it is in the survey.

In order to focus the results we also specifically excluded some material:

Non Welsh material such as ethnographic collections or Egyptology, single finds e.g. portable antiquities, non portable archaeology such as monuments, historic buildings, crosses, standing stones or sites and industrial collections.

Other terms defined included 'large collections', that is collections of more than 10 metres in shelf length, and 'temporary storage' as less than five years. These terms were defined in order to focus the recommendations.

Survey Methodology

The survey was conducted amongst museums in Wales and those organisations and individuals outside who have carried out archaeological work in Wales. The sample included:

- Registered Museums in Wales.
- Excavating units in England and Wales.
- Individual excavators and University researchers in England and Wales
- Local archaeology societies who have carried out excavations

The questionnaire was distributed to 133 organisations of which 95 replied, giving a response rate of 71%. The response rate for the questionnaire is extremely high for this type of survey and is a strong indicator of the importance that members of the sector ascribe to the sustainability of archives. As well as the survey we also carried out consultation in the form of meetings, interviews and correspondence and this helped identify some of the consensus issues from the community. We believe that this exercise and the establishment of consensus was one of the reasons why the results and recommendations have been universally welcomed.

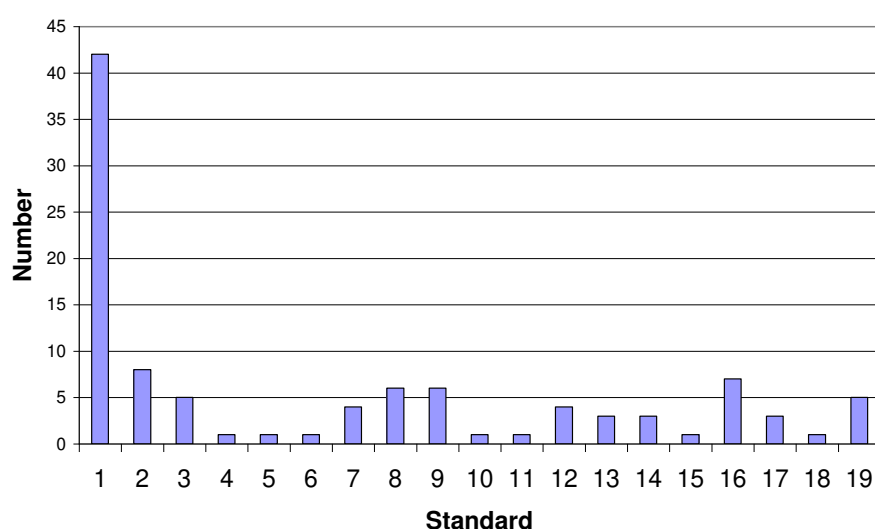
RESULTS

What follows is a summary of some of the key findings of the survey.

Standards in Operation

A striking point to come out of the survey related to standards which inform the management of archaeological archives. There is a plethora of relevant standards, schemes and documents in place: but in Wales there is no requirement to adhere to any standard for the management of archaeological archives and as a result there is no single standard that emerges as the most significant. Just over half (51%) of the respondents claim that they use no specific standards in the care of archaeological archives (Fig 1).

Fig 1: Standards in use



Key to graph

1. None
2. Internal documents
3. Guidelines from place of deposit
4. Borrowed from other organisation
5. Advice from NMGW
6. Commissioned advice
7. *SPECTRUM: The UK Museum Documentation Standard*, mda
8. *Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage*, UKIC
9. *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Excavation*, IFA
10. *First Aid for Finds*, Rescue and UKIC Archaeology Section
11. *Guidelines No 20*, Wessex Archaeology
12. *Towards an Accessible Archaeological Archive*, SMA
13. *Selection, Retention and Dispersal of Archaeological Collections*, SMA
14. *General Standards for the Preparation of Archaeological Archives Deposited with the Museum of London*, Museum of London
15. RCAHMW / WAT cataloguing system

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">16. <i>Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological Collections</i>, MGC17. <i>Management of Archaeological Projects</i>, English Heritage18. <i>Strategies for Digital Data</i>, ADS19. Other |
|---|

Even more worryingly, when the data is examined more closely it is clear that excavators and museums are using different standards and guidelines, with only one or two sets being used by both groups.

Transfer of collections

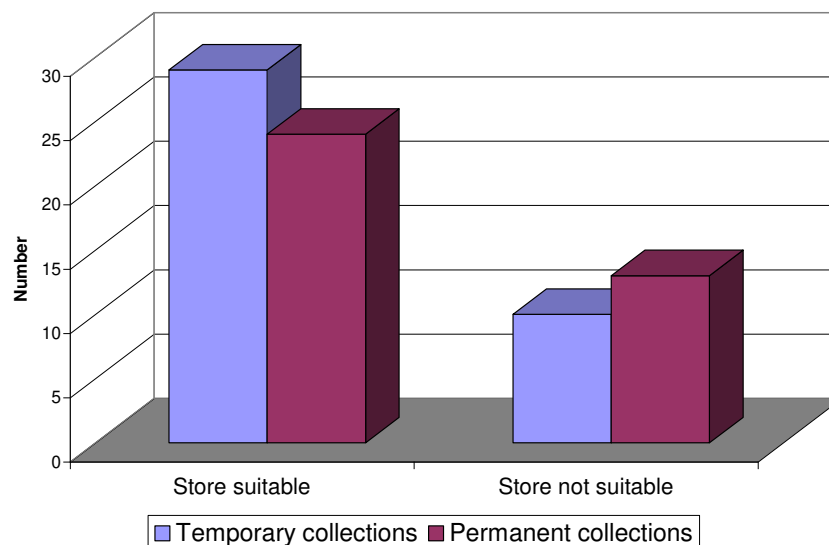
Many respondents noted problems with the transfer of excavated material from units to museums. Museums complained of not being involved early enough in the proceedings and needing more advice on what to retain as well as the value of the archaeological archive they have. Meanwhile the archaeological units complained of not getting replies from museums or in some cases having a problem finding somewhere to deposit material. In Wales there is no central agency which can solve this problem.

Very few museums have a policy for the deposition of archaeological archives and both excavators and museums welcomed the recommendation of written guidelines, with the proviso that they be short.

Storage conditions

A third of permanent collections are described as '*being in unsuitable stores*' by their curators (Fig 2), with several commenting specifically on the poor environmental conditions and lack of space. It was also noted that a common reply from excavators was that their storage conditions were satisfactory because collections were only being stored on a temporary basis. However, the survey results showed that two thirds of excavators held archaeological archives from excavations dating from over five years ago which we consider cannot be defined as temporary.

Fig 2: Assessment of Stores



Storage space

The research also showed that the vast majority of museum stores in Wales are over-full and that none have more than ten years growth capacity. Worryingly, when projecting future growth, the situation is much worse than the museums realise. Excavators report that over 500m of collections are waiting to be deposited in non-National Welsh museums, yet the museums are aware of only 6% of this material.

When these results are taken together it is clear that museums are facing a potentially disastrous situation.

The Costs of Storing Archaeological Archives

Like several earlier reports the project looked at the costs of storing archaeological archives. We used the survey to look at specifically Welsh data from which we were able to calculate an average operating cost for storing archaeological archives.

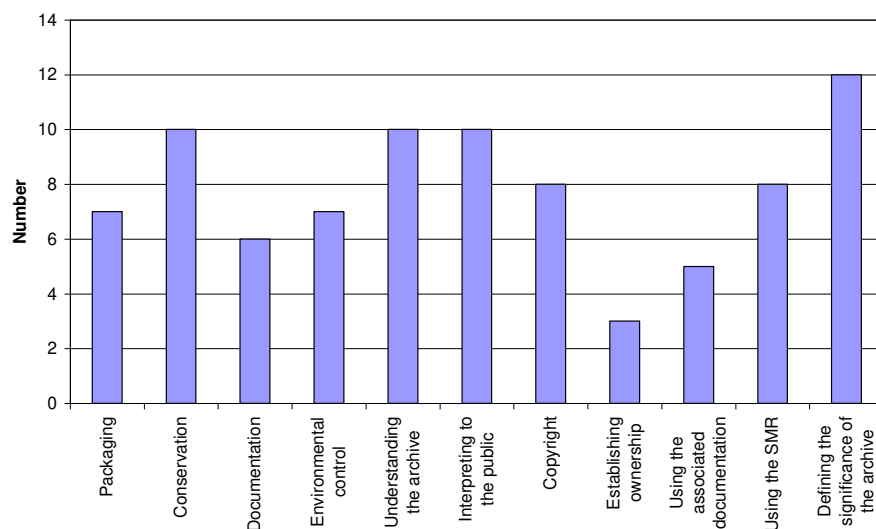
From survey data on shelving, the scale of collections, and running costs it was calculated that the average figure for the cost of storing archaeological archives in Wales is £1116 per metre length of shelving per year. Details of the calculation are contained within the full report (Henderson & Parkes 2003). This cost can be converted to a figure of £696 per m³ and compares closely to English Heritage's calculation of £746 per m³ (Swain *et al* 1998). It should be stressed that this figure places a single value on costs which do vary between different institutions but it is

reasonable to assume that the cost of storage is between £500 and £1000 for most institutions in Wales. It is our recommendation that a general figure of £700 per m³ would not be an unreasonable basis for cost predictions when accepting archaeological archives.

Access

The survey investigated how well archaeological collections are being managed. The responses of many curators noted that poor storage inhibited access and interpretation. The research identified (Fig 3) that the priority areas for advice and support were defining the significance of the archive, followed by conservation, understanding the archive and interpreting it to the public. Overall the survey demonstrated that archaeological archives are not being exploited to their full potential, particularly in terms of interpreting them to the public.

Fig 3: What support is needed for curators?



Research collections

The research raised several points particular to research and university collections which were very similar to the findings of the ‘Dining Amongst the Bones’ survey carried out by the Council of Museums in Wales (2002). These collections represent valuable archaeological resources which have been created with the use of public money. Often the collections are linked to particular individuals, with excavations carried out as research projects. Over time the finds can begin to be treated as the personal possession of these individuals and as a result there is no significant access

for the public to the collections, either physically or intellectually, and no overall management of the collections. Of particular concern in the report is that bad practice demonstrated in Welsh universities may be passed on to new archaeologists, or may diminish the respect for the high standards of research and teaching offered in these establishments.

Other findings

To summarise some of the other findings of the report:

- Waterlogged wood presents a distinct problem for a small but significant group of museums. We only have to look at the excavation of the Newport ship to see the resource implications of such finds.
- Most respondents have no policy that relates to the preservation of digital materials. As both software and hardware can quickly become obsolete there is the potential for a large loss of information in the near future.
- Few museums have had condition surveys on collections and without basic data it is difficult to identify targets for improvement.
- There is a significant lack of awareness of best practice in collecting records.
- Museums welcome interest in their collections and it is resource constraints that limit access.

Recommendations

Nine recommendations were made in the report. These have been discussed throughout Wales in consultation with the wider archaeological community and very much endorsed. Feedback from the consultation meetings will be used to tighten up on some of the recommendations for publication in a final report to be presented to the Welsh Assembly Government.

The recommendations are not mutually exclusive. The recommendation for centralised / regionalised stores are an either/or decision but all of the other recommendations can deliver benefits on a stand alone basis. However, they are recommended as a complete package for the most effective management of archaeological archives.

- 1a Create a central store, or
- 1b Create regional stores as centres of excellence
- 2 Create a database of Welsh archaeological collections
- 3 Establish a national panel for archaeology
- 4 CyMAL to develop a remit for archaeology
- 5 Encourage and develop a nationally framed collecting policy through the Museum Registration Scheme
- 6 Draw up standards for the deposition of collections and supporting information
- 7 Review the management of the information base
- 8 Require the management of archaeological archives by researchers
- 9 Additional training and awareness building

Three recommendations are discussed below in more detail

- 1. Centralised stores
- 2. The potential for CyMAL's remit to include archaeology
- 3. Guidelines for deposition of collections and supporting information

Centralised stores

The case for centralised stores has been made by several other reports. It is cost efficient, with the ratio of storage space to study space increasing, and the cost of maintaining the collection being directed towards interpretation and management of the collections. This in turn leads to a more direct public benefit.

The consultation document identified two options:

- 1. a single store for Wales, matching the All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group (2003) recommendation of a single 'regional' store for Wales.
- 2. several stores across Wales developing into regional centres of excellence, matching more closely the concept of 'museum hubs' promoted by Resource.

The option to create a single centralised store may offer the greatest efficient in terms of consolidated resources, but would pose serious access difficulties given the travel

time from North to South Wales. The option to develop **regional stores as centres of excellence was more widely welcomed in the consultation.** This would require a number of museums with existing provision for archaeology being supported to develop additional storage provision and access points for researchers. Staff could not be expected to develop expertise across all archaeological periods and may have to work across regional boundaries to provide the necessary specialist support. This solution maintains the research potential of the central store and retains some of the opportunity for more cost effective storage.

The consensus that emerged from consultation is that two stores, one in the north and one in the south, is most acceptable within the Welsh context. There is also the possibility of having a wet wood centre either attached to one of these stores or as a separate site. These proposals require further development to consider the amount of material which might be deposited as well as important issues of ownership, copyright, funding and management of the centres.

CyMAL's remit for archaeology

At present there is no agency with a responsibility for archaeology from planning to deposition. The distinction between excavation and deposition stems from the division of areas of responsibility of national agencies.

- There is an urgent need for a national, unified approach to archaeological collections.
- No one body in Wales has a mandate for the entire process and the necessary expertise is spread amongst many organisations with divisions between the excavation and the deposition of material.
- CyMAL will be established in Wales in April 2004 with a remit similar, but not identical to Resource.
- It was recommended that CyMAL's remit is extended to include archaeology at all stages, with a panel made up of representatives from all of the key bodies acting, in effect, as an advisory panel.

Guidelines for deposition of collections and supporting information

Both excavators and museums welcomed the recommendation of a single set of standards for transfer of archaeological archives covering the whole of Wales. These would aim to be short simple guidelines that act as a standard framework and would not preclude individual organisations from introducing specific additional requirements where necessary. These guidelines should cover:

- requirements for packaging
- agreement on labelling and marking of finds
- a definition of the minimum documentation required
- pre-transfer selection
- ownership and transfer of title

Conclusions

Following a period of consultation a final report was agreed by the steering group. This report produced by Jane Henderson and Phil Parkes is due to be presented to relevant civil servants and ministers in the Welsh Assembly Government and it is hoped that CyMAL will pick up on this agenda and take forward the final recommendations of the report.

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